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Statement submitted by International Federation for Family Development, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement
Effects of social exclusion as the result of family breakups on the elderly, women and children

A new concept of social exclusion?

Traditionally, social exclusion has been defined as a growing geographical polarization and/or access to opportunities, so that those living in often quite small areas, for example a housing estate or an inner or outer urban area, may be cut from life around them. Nowadays there is no full agreement as to what it means or how it is caused. In fact, it has been progressively attributed to different causes, not all of them directly related to material indigence. Alfred Kahn and Sheila Kamerman, in their publication *Beyond child poverty* (2003) stated that: "Although income and financial assets are still considered key elements in achieving positive outcomes for children, social exclusion is not primarily concerned with either of them (or with disability) but rather with the broader range of capabilities people enjoy or fail to enjoy".

This is probably why Professor Danny Dorling, in his article in the *Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, talked about a new concept of social exclusion in the European context: "The new exclusion is exclusion from the lives, the understanding, and the caring of others".

It is from this perspective that the Federation can draw some conclusions of its broad experience in dealing with families worldwide. The family is where the vast majority of people learn the fundamental skills for life. It is the environment from which life flows and, since family stability has been in continuous decline for the last decades in many countries, adults and children today are increasingly faced with obstacles not only to their material but also to their emotional well-being. They often have to cope with families that are dysfunctional, broken through abuse, separation or divorce or fatherless. This is especially true in the least advantaged sections of society and for the weakest members of them, namely, the elderly, women, the indebted and children.

Social and emotional exclusion in later life

According to the results of studies carried out by the Centre for Social Justice, and reported in 2000, "the breakdown of a family creates a fragmentation of a potential care and support system for its oldest members; a lifetime of economic dependency translates into a lack of stability and security". Divorce and the diminishing stability of familial relationships have weakened the bonds between pensioners and their children, meaning that fewer children are able or willing to care for their ageing parents. "Family breakdown has led to a significant cultural shift affecting the willingness of many family members to provide care".

Among other initiatives, this has probably led to the designation of 2012 as the "European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations" by the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (see decision 940/2011/EU). Active ageing was defined by the World Health Organization in 2002 as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age".

For the first stage of older age, health, participation and security can be boosted by a family environment, because it provides ageing members not only with the best conditions, but also with an important role within the family itself.

We shouldn't forget, however, that active ageing doesn't mean that there will not come a time when people need special care, and that no one can do this better and with less cost than family members, within an extended family home. The fact that this is not always possible should not hide this truth. In the event that the family chooses to provide such care, it should receive the financial and emotional support it deserves.

Other solutions have to be studied, and more research should be carried out to find the right environment for those who don't have a family to take care of them or who don't want their families to do it.

The progressive feminization of poverty

As shown in numerous reports, the number of women living in poverty has been growing steadily over the past decades. In 1950, women were only slightly more likely than men to be poor, whereas today they are about 50 per cent more likely to suffer from the consequences of poverty. Some of the changes in the social and economic conditions in the countries of the First World seem to be responsible for this fact.

The first is the delay in the age of marriage. Throughout the 1950s, young women married at the age of 20 years old and young men married at roughly 23 years of age. By 2010, the median age at the time of first marriage was over 30 in the European Union. This change has resulted in a marked decrease in fertility rates.

Another change is the rise in divorce. While in 1950 most people remained married until one of the spouses died, today over half of all marriages end in divorce. Together with the decline in marriage, this means that an increasing proportion of adult women are living alone, relying on themselves for economic support. And since they usually earn less, single women have a higher risk of being poor than single men.

A third trend affecting family arrangements is the increase in children born outside marriage. In the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), in 2008, the total number of such children represented nearly 40 per cent of the total population, while half a century ago the number was negligible. The result has been a growth in single-mother families, and single parenthood has affected women's poverty rates to a much greater degree than it has men's.

A fourth important factor is the increase in "non-family" households, particularly the increase in one-person households. In the United States of America, for example, only 10 per cent of all households were classified as "non-family" households in 1940; by the end of the twentieth century over 30 per cent were of this type.

The fifth trend affecting the sex differential in the poverty rate is the increase in life expectancy, which has affected women more than men. As women are likely to live longer than men, their retirement income has to stretch over more years.

Of course, all these factors are interrelated. It is important, in the face of such changes, to protect and improve women's well-being as much as possible.

The indebted

Professor Dorling provides a very insightful interpretation of the causes and consequences of the present financial crisis and shows another new kind of exclusion that has arisen from it: "The elimination of the worst of early twentieth-century poverty, coupled with the tales of elitists who believed that those who were poorer were inferior, reduced the power of argument of groups that had previously succeeded in bringing down inequalities in resources between families and classes within many affluent societies. It is slowly becoming clear that in countries like Britain poverty did not fall over the course of the last 30 years. Instead, growing financial inequality resulted in large and growing numbers being excluded from the norms of society, and created an expanding and increasingly differentiated social class suffering a new kind of poverty: the new poor, the excluded, the indebted".

It is interesting to note that younger people have been more affected by the financial crisis. From 2007, there has been an acute breakdown of employment opportunities for the young, and the emergence of an unprecedented "scissor effect". The employment of young people and seniors has not continued to evolve in the harmonized correlative way observed over the last 50 years. The employment of the young has literally collapsed, while that of seniors has actually increased dramatically. It has been concluded that young people are the most vulnerable age group in the current crisis.

Children as the weakest victims

The exclusion of children can result from the actions of a number of different agents. And once again, the family is the main agent. As reported in "Social exclusion and children: A European view for a US debate", published by the London School of Economics in 2002: "Parents, quite obviously, have an enormous influence on the well-being of their children. One implication is that parents must be a major potential agent for their children's exclusion. Parents may fail to make sufficient effort to find work and hence to bring enough money into the household. They may fail to spend their income fairly or wisely. They may fail to take enough interest in the education of their children. They may fail to pay adequate attention to their children's health and nutrition. They may fail to help their children develop their social skills and contacts".

There is still a lot to be learned about how family breakups affect children. It has been explained that, in addition to purely material losses, children of divorce often also lose the social capital and prestige associated with the occupational and educational status of the other parent, usually the father. The downward social mobility associated with the loss of the higher-status parent is correspondingly an important explanation for the weaker educational outcomes of children of divorce.

Conclusions and proposals

Social changes that have happened in the countries of the First World during the past 50 years have significantly altered how the family environment supports its weakest members (the elderly, women, the unemployed and children), not only materially but, more often, emotionally. This contributes to an actual exclusion that

should be studied more deeply and dealt with in public policies and through the actions of civil society.

In addition to the need for more thorough research in this field, we suggest:

- Organization of social awareness campaigns about new kinds of social exclusion
- Targeting and dissemination of good practices to promote the involvement of older people in their families and in community activities
- Provision of financial help and special credits to women living in poverty
- Promotion of credit and microcredit programmes to help young entrepreneurs to start their own businesses
- Support social recognition of family stability and prevent breakups through parenting courses.